

HEADS & TAILS

by Ian Jeffrey

This is the record of an interview (imagined) with a visitor to the exhibition Heads & Tails at The Art Station in Saxmundham.

You spent some time in the exhibition and I saw you looking closely at what was there. Did you come to any conclusions? At least tell me something about the experience. I was there too, and have some ideas – nothing very definite. How would you begin? Do you have a theory or a proposal?

Well, I would say that I felt I was acting in a composite artwork, for I was often on show to myself, mirrored or reflected. The exhibits, mostly on casters, could be moved or had been wheeled into position, perhaps in relation to light from the window louvers. There were few captions, although there were bits of writing such as EVERY MAN IS TORN (No. 21) – from a song of the 1990s, I think. Exhibit titles give one some kind of guarantee about acceptable meanings. If we know what something is called we often feel assured. As many of the exhibits were made up of frames and compartments I could also see that there could be alternative arrangements which would give different readings.

You were, in other words, confused, although I don't expect you to admit it.

No, in EVERY MAN IS TORN I noticed that the cotton inset which took up most of the frame was carefully attached to its textile base by small safety pins, equally and neatly set. I could easily understand the kind of attention and concentration that had gone into that aspect of the work. I wasn't confused at all in that respect, but my understanding was based on physical experience of doing things by hand in ordinary contexts. So, there are things that words say and mean, and there are other phenomena that are understood physically or even routinely through experience. Words, by contrast, are quite tricky – not always clear. I might even see no. 21 as a kind of confessional self-portrait or life story, although not one that is very openly admitted by the artist. I can make up my mind to some degree or hazard a guess from the available material.

You must have been confused or at a loss from time to time! Or do you have some kind of innate insight into mysterious arrangements. What, for instance, did you make of BANQUET 22, with its pieces of gold and waxed legs – in the Green Room?

Yes, I can bring it to mind. There are two tables, each supporting a wax-cast leg. The leg to the right, I see, has two gilded toes, and the one to the left has a couple of electroplated golden walnuts attached to a metal spring. I saw it or experienced it as a basic exercise in counting. There was a large ball of compacted human hair in the assemblage and some mineral casts of compressed balloons. That is to say, there were things on show, easy to identify and to put together as one looked. They were on a table and could be taken for "a banquet". You might say that it is a blasphemous scene in relation to the scriptures. It is a possibility, and I can't ignore it. In a Surrealist piece you might get weird and suggestive juxtapositions but think nothing of them. In this case, however, the sparing display suggests that it is an arrangement with a meaning. Perhaps it is an experiment with a few stressed items: two legs, two toes, two walnuts and one lump or hair (a hairball – perhaps as you find in animals' stomachs). It is a pleasure to be pointed this way and that, and to be asked questions that you can only answer provisionally – make your answers up even.

Maybe the artist's gift is to make us (me anyway) take things seriously. I can't just put Banquet 22 to one side as a caprice. I would say that Abigail Lane has the ability to play games seriously, or to make me, at least, wonder.

What about the bird embroideries which are a major part of the exhibition? How do you understand them? Do you see them as ecological pieces, or as a mystery series?

Well, they were exhibited in context, with a lot of complex bird noise played as a background to the main installation on the ground floor. That is probably how we usually hear anything, as part of a mixture made up of different pitches and volumes. It is the kind of mixture I was aware of in the main room upstairs, for I could sometimes hear trains passing on a nearby bridge and the sound of trees moving in the wind. Long ago we understood things as distinct items to be studied individually. A specimen might represent a class, and the bird motifs point back to that time – which is to some extent still with us. The embroideries are caged, behind metal bars, and the birds' song lines look to some degree like spilt and dried blood, residues of suffering. We are, though, lulled into a sense of comfortable normality for the pieces look like bits of domestic decoration beginning to disintegrate. I once saw a collector's panel of dried butterflies thrown out with broken and skewed wings- I was reminded of that. The images are contained or held on prepared and decorated fabrics which contrast with their desiccated outpourings. The overall title DOING TIME supports the idea for it invokes the solitude of prison life and its immobility. There are a dozen birds on show, from a thrush to a blue tit – like a useful list of common birds of G.B. They are in 12 cages with 4 or 5 bars apiece. They are made from thousands of stitches, virtually beyond counting, and the thin threads of their flayed songs can't be counted. So, we are introduced to a world where we can identify the occupants, from an Observer's Book, before moving into Infinity. We've been put through a small exercise, more or less without being aware of it before being moved into the large project space which deals with bigger items in more evident sets.

You are trying to tell me that there is some kind of analytical process at work. We then turn from counting and assessing to being surprised?

Yes, in the Project Space you will come across examples of affable Surrealism: see the upper row in Zig Zag Lady (Country Life), no. 23, where an unravelling woollen jumper holds, at the neck, a partly concealed bird's nest with an egg. It is a companionable surprise, and you may recall as a child coming across a bird's nest half hidden in a hedge. And there are boots somewhere in the same series that leave naked footmarks visible in a mirror down below. There is a sort of consistent feeling to it all, a sort of gravity – I might say. For instance, on one of the landings there is a piece called RE- MAKE RE-MODEL no. 7, of whitish bricks in good condition. They are said to be of dust and plaster, with the dust taken from the bag of a vacuum cleaner. It is a subdued memorial, I thought, for vacuum dust contains just about everything mixed up including road dust blown in and particles of human skin, residues shed as we go about our daily work. There is more house dust in no. 28 – black bricks, I recall. Decay is on the agenda, and plays a considerable part in the bird imagery in DOING TIME. Abigail doesn't insist on this kind of bad news, but it is sometimes evident or to be guessed at in, for instance, those wounded shirts that crop up – heart spaces. The Young British Artists are/were usually more blatant in their remarks. She is more sidelong, more symbolic – as in the heart-shirts. This is more or less pointed out in the succinct foreword to the exhibition in the brochure, which looks like a wiring diagram – very precise. The exhibition that she managed at Rutland (with Lala) also had a melancholy tinge to it for it was made of lost objects hung up for inspection – including a lost hearing aid found in the forest – c.f. the household dust shed unthinkingly.

What were you looking at exactly? Did you decide? Was it a show of individual pieces or an ensemble where everything connected?

It fitted together, like a world where everything was complementary – or where I felt that it was, and could compare, for example, one Zig Zag Lady with another. Thinking of which, I was also pushed in the direction of Matthew Weir, represented by Waterfall II. He was also the author of Wound Man in the drawings section, no. 19. Like Abigail he seems to point to an implication of the human with the natural, as is the case with Glenn Brown –Greuze head, no. 34, with foliage and green woman implications. What the exhibition did was to involve me in a kind of world or some kind of cultural ensemble in which the body is implicated in other living material (material that transformed, like the burnable anthracite in no. 29). So, I would say that the exhibition presented a way of seeing that needed to make use of quite a lot of complementary evidence, one thing reflecting on another..